

Sheol

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“Sheol” is the most commonly used name for the abode of the dead in the Hebrew bible (Lewis, 1992, 2:101), though the descriptions of this abode are fairly sparse compared to the detailed descriptions of the underworld in Mesopotamian and Egyptian mythologies. What is described about Sheol is that it is the lowest possible point imaginable, in contrast to the Heavens (Lewis, 1992, 2:103), and that it is inescapable. The Gates of Sheol keep the dead in, as the gates of various underworlds do in other near eastern religions (Lewis, 1992, 2:103). As for what it is physically like, Sheol is often described as a place of darkness, dust, and sometimes silence (Lewis, 1992, 2:103-104). We might notice that all of these things are also true of a grave, which is one of the reasons why some scholars think that Sheol refers not to the underworld but to graves (Lewis, 1992, 2:104). Whether this is the case or not, Sheol definitely seems to have some associations with them, but it also has too many similarities to the underworlds of other religions to only refer to graves (Lewis, 1992, 2:104). Along with graves, Sheol can also refer to a personification of death or a monarch of the dead. In this personified form, Sheol is often described as having an insatiable appetite and is sometimes portrayed as an evil force that one could make a covenant with (Lewis, 1992, 2:104). Although this personification appears enough to be significant, Sheol is still usually referred to as a place where the dead reside.

But who resides there? Sheol’s denizens are called Rephaim (Lewis, 1992, 2:104), but what kind of people make up the Rephaim is unclear. Sometimes Sheol is referred to as a general afterlife, a place where both the righteous and wicked dead go, but sometimes it seems that only the wicked dead are there (Lewis, 1992, 2:105). Some suggest that only those who do not have a common death but instead a violent, “evil death” will go there (Lewis, 1992, 2:105). This is based on the idea that God will make one’s death a reflection of their righteousness, so the righteous will have a peaceful death and the wicked a more violent or painful one (Elledge, 2020, 2:194). So, those with an “evil death” will go to the darkness of Sheol while those with a common death will reunite with their families. This theory, though, is not entirely accepted, and even if it is correct in some cases, in others Sheol could still refer to a place of all the dead (Lewis, 1992, 2:105).

So, why should we care about Sheol and its residents when looking at Matthew? While the word “sheol” does not appear in Matthew, another word that we might recognize does: Hades. Hades is the ancient Greek designation for the underworld and the ruler of the underworld, so when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek for the Septuigent, Sheol was usually translated as Hades (Lewis, 1992, 2:105). When we see “Hades” in the Gospel of Matthew, we can infer that it is probably referring either to Sheol or to an underworld based off of Sheol. Indeed, Hades and Sheol have many similarities between them: both are associated with darkness and the lowest part of the world, and both have gates to keep the dead in (Lewis, 1992, 2:105). As mentioned above, Hades is also personified not just in Greek mythology but also in the New Testament, just as Sheol is sometimes personified (Lewis, 1992, 2:105). Both are also ambiguous when it comes to their residents: just like the denizens of Sheol, the denizens of Hades are sometimes seem to be all of the dead, sometimes just the wicked (Lewis, 1992, 2:105). However, the New Testament does have a separate afterlife specifically for the wicked. Gehenna is a fiery afterlife where the ungodly are punished (Lewis, 1992, 2:105). This clearer separation of ungodly dead from the rest of the dead is a deviation from the Hebrew depiction of Sheol, and precedes the more strict demarcation of Heaven for the righteous from Hell for the wicked (Lewis, 1992, 2:105).

Works Cited

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- Elledge, Casey E. “Death and Afterlife.” In *The T&T Clark Encyclopedia of Second Temple Judaism*, edited by Daniel M. Gurtner and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, 194-106, Vol.2. London: T&T Clark, 2020.